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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Sexual health in your hands: How the smartphone apps can improve your sexual wellbeing? ☆

S. Eleuteri <sup>a,\*</sup>, R. Rossi <sup>b</sup>, F. Tripodi <sup>b</sup>, A. Fabrizi <sup>b</sup>, C. Simonelli <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Sapienza University of Rome, Via di Grottarossa, 1035, 00189 Rome, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Institute of clinical sexology, Rome, Italy

## KEYWORDS

Smartphone;  
Apps;  
Sexual health;  
Internet sexuality;  
Online sexual activities (OSA);  
Sexual risk behaviors

**Summary** In recent years, the numbers of smartphone users has surged across the world and downloads of smartphone apps have grown significantly, with smartphone usage increased to 73% among American adolescents since 2013. The main goal of this article is to present a review of the literature focusing the use of smartphone applications to improve sexual health. Using a smartphone application to provide sexual health information, especially to younger populations, might aid in increasing awareness of sexual risk behaviors before sexual debut. Providing accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date sexual health education materials through smartphones vs websites might improve their sexual health outcomes. However, there are few smartphone applications related to sexual and reproductive health that are available to users. Research has shown that 80% of Internet users in the United States search online for health information, and that young people are gathering health information using mobile devices with increasing frequency, including sexual health information. However, while new technologies, including smartphone apps, are used to facilitate health information seeking, health-related apps are infrequently downloaded and rarely used. This suggests that, to promote sexual health through smartphone apps, researchers could partner with app developers in order to integrate sexual health promotion interventions in popular sex-related or dating apps. However, it is evident that these apps provide novel opportunities to engage at-risk populations in sexual health

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [stefano.eleuteri@uniroma1.it](mailto:stefano.eleuteri@uniroma1.it) (S. Eleuteri).

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interventions. Several studies have suggested that young adults consider sexual health promotion via apps acceptable. Future research should focus on evaluating these efforts specifically in the reduction of negative sexual health consequences such as a decrease of STIs and unintended pregnancies as well as whether a sexual health app can link clients to health services. Our results could help clinicians by offering information about the potential use of smartphone apps to increase sexual health.

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## Introduction

In recent years, the numbers of smartphone users has surged across the world and downloads of smartphone apps have grown significantly (Bert et al., 2014), with smartphone usage increased to 73% among American adolescents since 2013 (Alptraum, 2013). Just to give an example of what it is happening in Western Countries, over half of adults in the US, across all income groups, own a smartphone (Smith, 2012) and nearly one-third of users reported having downloaded at least one health-related application ("app"; Rainie, 2012). Smartphone apps provide a new platform for information distribution and networking (Huang et al., 2016). Mobile health (mHealth) applications refer to programs on one's smart devices (e.g., phones, iPads, and computers) that can be used to promote well-being. The rapid growth and use of mHealth technological applications for mental health care have led to groundbreaking ways to treat psychological conditions but have also introduced new complications that have yet to be fully addressed. For instance, researchers have indicated that mHealth apps present opportunities for psychoeducation prior to treatment and stigma reduction and allow for clients to overcome the distance barrier in rural areas (Jones and Moffitt, 2016). This platform creates various opportunities for health promotion activities such as distributing health-related information, offering resources for health care, and providing forums for sharing experiences (Bert et al., 2016). However, many health-based apps already provide information to users, but few of them incorporate evidence-based theories for behavior change (West et al., 2012). The Internet has become an important and readily available medium also in exploring one's sexuality (Galbreath et al., 2002). The empirical research on Internet sexuality has grown steadily since 1993. The most researched area to date has been the consumption of Internet pornography, which also has the greatest intensity of use compared to the other areas of Internet sexuality (Eleuteriet al., 2014), like sexual health. The aim of this article is to present a review of the literature focusing the use of smartphone applications to improve sexual health.

## How the apps can improve health?

The benefits of using apps for health promotion are many, including low cost to develop and operate, potentially widespread distribution, and convenience for both health

care providers and seekers (Bert et al., 2014). Additionally, these applications are cost-effective, increase accessibility to underserve and ethnic minorities, and facilitate the treatment process (Price et al., 2014; Smith, 2010). A recent review of medication adherence apps found that, as a whole, these tools could be helpful for patients struggling with long-term medication adherence (Dayer et al., 2013). Krishna et al. (2009) showed that mobile phone usage, incorporating abbreviated reminder services and general adolescent health education materials, can improve health outcomes especially among teenagers.

## How the apps can improve sexual health?

New and innovative ways to deliver sexual health information are needed to better support clients. Using a smartphone application to provide sexual health information, especially to younger populations, might aid in increasing awareness of sexual risk behaviors before sexual debut. More than 46% of surveyed websites in 2010 that provided sexual health information contained errors or inaccurate content. Providing accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date sexual health education materials through smartphones vs websites might improve their sexual health outcomes (Buhi et al., 2010). However, there are few smartphone applications related to sexual and reproductive health that are available to users (Brayboy et al., 2017).

The use of apps could provide a unique avenue to increase oral contraception (OC) adherence and thereby, reduce the risk of unplanned pregnancy. In fact, while young women have the highest risk of contraceptive failure (Kost et al., 2008), most also have constant access to their smartphone. One study aimed to systematically evaluate the utility of English language smartphone-platform OC reminder apps (Gal et al., 2015). In the summer of 2013, 39 OC reminder apps were available for download, in the US, on Android and/or iPhone smartphone platforms. Perhaps the most important finding from this study was that most apps (82%) reliably sent a daily reminder, at a time selected by the user, that an OC pill should be taken. Additionally, nearly all OC reminder apps functioned without Internet connectivity. None of the apps in this study generate an OC pill reminder if the smartphone is turned off. Likewise, no apps account for a user being away from her smartphone for an extended period of time.

On the basis of the growing use of social media and smartphones by teenagers to learn about sexual health, Girl Talk,

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